

UB Law Forum

Volume 26
Number 1 *Fall 2012*

Article 17

10-1-2012

Teaching the Teachers: SUNY Buffalo Law Hosts Ambitious Legal Writing Conference

UB Law Forum

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation

UB Law Forum (2012) "Teaching the Teachers: SUNY Buffalo Law Hosts Ambitious Legal Writing Conference," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 26 : No. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol26/iss1/17

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

Teaching the teachers

*SUNY Buffalo Law
hosts ambitious legal
writing conference*

It was called the Empire State Legal Writing Conference, but the June 23 gathering at SUNY Buffalo Law School extended its reach far beyond New York. Participants from 25 law schools in a dozen states took part, sharing ideas and experiences from the creative challenge of teaching law students the fine art of legal writing and analysis.

"The skills that are required to write well as a lawyer are far more complex than many people realize," says **Stephen J. Paskey**, who teaches legal analysis, writing and research, known as the LAWR program, at SUNY Buffalo Law and was the local conference organizer. "We teach the kind of analytical skills that apply to any area of law—how to synthesize a rule of law from multiple cases, for instance. Then there are writing skills that are very specific to writing in a legal context."

"We also teach more general writing skills. Even though law students as a group are bright and have done well as undergraduates, for most of them their general writing skills are not at a level they should be to be effective as lawyers."

Hence the need for experts to come together to explore and create ideas for how best to develop those skills in law students. Conference attendees heard more than 20 presentations on a wide range of topics, such as assessing students' progress; teaching specialized research and advanced writing; and exercises for building research skills and using plain language. Five SUNY Buffalo Law faculty made presentations:

Bernadette Gargano and **Monica Piga Wallace** on "Advanced Legal Writing: Developing a 'Practice-Ready' Course Beyond the First Year"; **Patrick J. Long** on "Teaching Continuity and Structure



At the blackboard, SUNY Buffalo Law School's Laura Beth Reilly

Through the Gettysburg Address"; **Chris Pashler** on "Know Your Audience: Writing to Address Potential Bias"; and **Laura Reilly** on "Turning Skeptical Students Into Believers: Fun and Engaging Ideas for the Classroom."

The task, Paskey says, is essentially one of translation. "As a lawyer, you're writing about ideas that are often incredibly complex. To write about them in a way that is clear, understandable and direct is really a challenge for most first-year students. You would think, for instance, that students with a degree in English or another field in the humanities would have a leg up in legal writing, but that really isn't true. Students learn many habits as undergraduates that don't translate well to a legal environment."

Keynote speaker for the conference was **Sarah Ricks**, a clinical professor of law at Rutgers Law School. Her talk addressed the overlap between legal writing programs and experiential learning, and argued for "erasing the lines" between legal writing, clinics and pro bono programs.

Integrating legal writing instruction with such practical opportunities, Ricks said, helps students to learn the professional skills of learning in teams and engaging in peer review. "Working for a real client can motivate students to do

better work," she said, "knowing that their work product is not going into the recycle bin but rather into the hands of some non-profit or government agency or clinical client that can use that information to do something in the world."

Ricks cited several "interesting experiments" in teaching legal writing, such as assigning first-year students to write about questions facing a law school clinic; having students research and write about issues for a non-profit organization; and collaborating with a judge to create assignments based on a pending case, for which students write bench notes.

A daylong Scholar's Forum sponsored by the Association of Legal Writing Directors immediately preceded the conference. A dozen scholars took advantage of the opportunity to present scholarship ideas or works in progress for discussion and critique by scholars of legal writing, including keynote speaker Ricks. The aim, Paskey said, was to encourage interdisciplinary scholarship in the legal writing community.

Christine Bartholomew, who also teaches legal analysis, writing and research at SUNY Buffalo Law, coordinated the workshop.